

Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce
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Press Release

For Release at 12:00 noon, March 26, 2003

State Agencies Working Together to Feed Mississippi School Children with Mississippi Grown Products

The Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce and the Mississippi Department of Education are working in conjunction with the United States Department of Defense to implement the Farm to School Program in Mississippi's Public Schools. The program uses federal funds to procure fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables for use in school lunch facilities. Monies were set aside in the 2002 Farm Bill for USDA to provide spending for the Department of Defense nutrition program. Each state is allocated an amount on a fair share basis.

"This program benefits many people statewide," Commissioner of Agriculture Lester Spell said. "A substantial market for our fruit and vegetable growers is established locally, and our students have access to fresh, healthy food produced right here in Mississippi. We have enjoyed working with the Department of Education and the Department of Defense and look forward to successfully continuing to carry out this program."

The Department of Education's Office of Child Nutrition, Purchasing and Food Distribution Division, is responsible for issuing surveys to school districts to determine quantity demanded. Orders are then placed with the Department of Defense, and produce is purchased and delivered to contracted commercial warehouses. The Office of Child Nutrition is then responsible for the delivery of the ordered produce to each school.

"We are extremely excited about the possibilities of this nutrition program," said State Superintendent of Education Dr. Henry Johnson. "Providing locally grown, fresh fruits and vegetables to Mississippi students and schools is a wonderful opportunity for our state, and we are pleased to partner with the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and the Department of Defense in this effort."

Gail Lynn is Division Director for Purchasing and Food Distribution in the Mississippi Department of Education and supervises the program over all school districts. "Obesity in children is an issue in schools. This program gets the students accustomed to making healthy choices in their diets. By using Mississippi produce, everyone wins. Farmers benefit economically, and they assist the children with making healthy eating decisions."

Guy Feltenstein, Director of Fruits and Vegetables, is overseeing the program for the Mississippi Department of Agriculture. "This is a program that ensures a new market for our growers. It will also give them the opportunity to plant new varieties, as well as fall crops for which there has never been a market. Anytime we can take the opportunity to teach our students about Mississippi grown produce, then they will grow

up looking for Mississippi produce. We're also glad that the Mississippi Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association is taking an active role in this program."

Mary Hill, Director of Food Services for Jackson Public Schools, is very satisfied with the program. "Our district has enjoyed the fresh produce and the product has been excellent and well received by students and staff. The program helps with our stand on the importance of healthy foods in our schools, and the ease of access and serving the produce has aided us in achieving our objectives. Even several parents have called to see where they could find similar retail products."

In school year 2002-2003, \$1.15 million was allocated to Mississippi for purchases in the Farm to School Program.

Ken Wilmoth, Produce Specialist for the U.S. Department of Defense, oversees the program nationwide. "Using this money and working with the Departments of Education and Agriculture, we've increased the consumption of fruits and veggies in school lunch programs. This is a great opportunity for the growers. Children will always eat lunch, so growers will be able to plan for the constant local demand. Mississippi has a very promising future for this next school year."

"We are very pleased to have this program in place in Mississippi. This allows a large amount of Mississippi grown fruits and vegetables to remain in the state. Growers and cooperatives profit from this program through reduced transportation costs, and awareness of Mississippi products increases through use in our schools' cafeterias," Spell said.

Any farmer interested in participating in the Farm to School Program should contact Guy Feltenstein at 601-483-3451 or e-mail at gbfmdac@aol.com.